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# **Russia's "Contribution" to the Inception of the Eastern Partnership\***

**VASILE ROTARU**

## **INTRODUCTION**

In May 2009, six former Soviet republics, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, signed in Prague the Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), a European initiative meant to bring these countries closer to the EU. However, despite EU's assurances that the EaP will benefit not only Europe, but also the former Soviet countries and Russia, by transforming the Eastern neighbours into a stable and prosperous common border, Moscow saw the initiative only to EU's advantage, doubting that the former Soviet countries were so eager to join the EaP, considering the large number of costly reforms they had to implement. Thus, from its inception, Russian officials openly expressed their suspicion and concern towards the EaP. The Prime Minister Putin, for instance, characterized the initiative as "an alternative to NATO's expansion to the East", while for Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov, it was "an attempt to extend the EU's sphere of influence, including Belarus"<sup>1</sup>.

The present paper will argue that the EaP was borne not only from the EU's need for security and stability, but also from the desire of the former Soviet states who saw rapprochement with the EU as the only solution to preserve their sovereignty, threatened by a more and more assertive Russian foreign policy in the 'near abroad'. Based on the assumption that Russia is a realist power, governed by the elites educated during the Cold War, which does not believe in win-win situations in international relations, the author have found appropriate to analyse Russian foreign policy in the former Soviet space before the launch of the EaP through the realist paradigm.

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<sup>1</sup> EUOBSERVER, "EU Expanding its 'Sphere of Influence', Russia Says", 21 March, 2009, <http://euobserver.com/foreign/27827>, last accessed August 22, 2014.

## “NEAR ABROAD” AND “COMMON NEIGHBOURHOOD”

Despite a short period of rejection, the former Soviet republics, most of them gathered in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), remained one of the priorities of Moscow's foreign policy, the interest towards these countries being clearly stated by every foreign policy concepts of the Russian Federation. Even the term “near abroad” (ближнее зарубежье) used in Russian diplomatic jargon with reference to the former Soviet republics, proves a special status “granted” to them. It may imply that these countries are not as foreign as others and therefore should be subject to different rules or treatment, or that Russia has “special rights” and responsibilities for maintaining security within this region<sup>2</sup>. An argument in this sense can be the January 1994 speech of the Russian foreign minister Kozyrev at the conference with the Baltic and the CIS ambassadors, where he claimed that “the CIS and the Baltic states constitutes the area in which Russia's principal vital interests are concentrated ... [and] from which the main threats to its interest emanate. We should not withdraw from these regions which have been in the sphere of Russian interests for centuries”<sup>3</sup>.

In general, Russia's special interest in the “near abroad” results from economic factors, diaspora issue, and more important, from its own security needs. Obsessed with fear of being encircled by enemies, Moscow perceives the former Soviet republics paramount for protection of its own borders. Thus, as throughout history, Belarus proved to be the land through which the Western invaders made their way towards central Russia and Moscow, the Kremlin tries to keep this country as close as possible as a precaution. Ukraine is seen as the southwestern anchor and Russia's Achilles' heel. Moldova is for Ukraine what Ukraine is to Russia, therefore, if Ukraine cannot be defended, either cannot Russia<sup>4</sup>, the smallest former Soviet republic “earning” thus the strategic

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<sup>2</sup> Mustafa Aydin, Neslihan Kaptanoglu, “Regionalization of Great Power Security – Near Abroad, broader Middle Asia, and European Neighbourhood”, in *Globalization and Environment Challenges. Hexagon Series on Human and Environmental Security and Peace*, vol. 3, part. 8, Springer, 2008, p. 764.

<sup>3</sup> Alexei Arbatov, “Russian Security Interests and Dilemmas: An Agenda for the Future”, in Alexei Arbatov, Abram Chayes, Antonia Handler Chayes, Lara Olson (eds.), *Managing Conflict in the Former Soviet Union. Russian and American Perspectives*, Center for Science and International Affairs John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, 1997, p. 429.

<sup>4</sup> George Friedman, “Geopolitical Journey, part 4: Moldova”, *Stratfor*, 2010, [http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20101118\\_geopolitical\\_journey\\_part\\_4\\_moldova](http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20101118_geopolitical_journey_part_4_moldova), last accessed June 11, 2014.

importance for Russia; while the Transcaucasus or the South Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan) is a buffer zone and a rivalry area between Russia, Turkey, Iran and the USA. For the purpose of this paper, we will refer only to these six former Soviet republics from the "near abroad".

However, with the 2004-2007 EU enlargement, the "near abroad" became also EU's neighbourhood, a reality, apparently, not very comfortable for the Kremlin. European proposal to call the countries residing between the EU and Russia "the common neighbourhood" in the road map for external security of the Four Common Spaces encountered Russia's unilateral refusal. From the Kremlin's perspective, this seemed to imply a certain challenge to its sphere of influence. Thus, at the meeting of the Permanent Partnership Council, in April 2005, the two parties agreed that instead of "common neighbourhood", the wording in the road map would be "countries adjacent to Russia" and "countries adjacent to the EU", specifying thus clearly the separate nature of the links that the two actors had with their respective neighbourhoods<sup>5</sup>. The terms "common neighbourhood", along with "shared neighbourhood" have, however entered the academic language and are widely used when referring to six former Soviet countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

On one side, the CIS countries are at the core of Russian foreign policy<sup>6</sup> and on the other side, it can appear that with the advantage of the intensive links created during a three generations common history and strong economic leverage Moscow has a clear advantage in front of the EU's policy towards the "common neighbourhood" and the Kremlin's task to keep its neighbour close should not be difficult at all. However, all the six countries addressed in this paper have contradicted this scenario.

## THE FIRST SIGNS OF DISOBEDIENCE IN THE "NEAR ABROAD"

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought Moscow a new dilemma: how to deal with the former Soviet territories. Before the disintegration of the USSR many intellectuals and Russian policy-makers were arguing that should Russia get rid of the other Soviet republics, its people's standard of living was likely to elevate to that of Japan and Germany<sup>7</sup>. Thus, on the one hand it appeared that,

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<sup>5</sup> Hiski Haukkala, *The EU-Russia Strategic Partnership. The Limits of Post-Sovereignty in International Relations*, Routledge, 2010, p. 137.

<sup>6</sup> Olena Prystayko, "EU-Russia Common Neighbourhood", EU-Russia Centre, Brussels, 2008, p. 59.

<sup>7</sup> Tassos T. Fakiolas, Efstathios T. Fakiolas, "Russia's Grand Strategic Alternatives at the Dawn of the New Century", *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, vol.17, no.3, 2004, p. 388.

now alone, Russia would not have to subsidize other republics and would get rid of a financial burden, allowing the country to integrate quickly into the Western economic community, and, on the other hand, the Kremlin was eager to get rid of neo-imperialist tendencies from its foreign policy arguing that an imperialist Russia could not be at the same time a democratic country<sup>8</sup>. Within this context, at its inception, the CIS was planned as an organization designed to make an easy civilized “divorce” of the former Soviet republics, this thinking fitting the liberal internationalism paradigm – the dominant of Russia’s foreign policy that time.

However, the “Western honeymoon” did not last too long. The parliamentary elections of December 1993 represented a defeat of the liberal reformers and a shift of Russian foreign policy to more traditional realist concepts, promoted by the great power balancers<sup>9</sup>. The regret about lost influence in international politics translated quickly into a policy of keeping the former Soviet republics, except for the Baltics, within Russian sphere of influence<sup>10</sup>. The interest for the “near abroad” was officially proclaimed by the 14 September 1995 presidential decree, “The strategic course of the Russian Federation with the CIS states”, that asserted the need to “intensify integration within the CIS and to improve coordination of Russian executive bodies’ activities in this direction”<sup>11</sup>. This interest was later assessed by the National Security Concept of the Russian Federation, approved by the president Yeltsin in December 1997. The document specifies that the cooperation within the CIS is a priority of Russian foreign policy and “deepening and development of relations with the CIS countries is the most important factor”<sup>12</sup>. The replacement, in January 1996, of Andrei Kozyrev by Yevgenii Primakov as Foreign Minister only confirmed the shift in Russian diplomacy from a liberal internationalism to a great power balancing paradigm, accompanied by Moscow’s desire of establishing its diplomatic and security hegemony throughout the territory of the former Soviet Union<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Mustafa Aydin, Neslihan Kaptanoglu, “Regionalization of Great Power...cit.”, p. 765.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew C. Kuchins, Igor A. Zevelev, “Russian Foreign Policy: Continuity in Change”, *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 35, no.1, 2012, p. 153.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Rywkin, “Russia and the Near Abroad Under Putin”, *American Foreign Policy Interests: The Journal of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy*, vol.25, no.1, 2003, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> INTERFAX, “Bishkek Welcomes Moscow Decision on CIS Relations”, in Zbigniew Brzezinski, Sullivan Paige (eds.), *Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States: Documents, Data, and Analysis*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (Washington, D.C.), 1997, p. 201.

<sup>12</sup> See Концепция национальной безопасности Российской Федерации 1997 [National Security Concept of the Russian Federation 1997], <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/1.html>, last accessed August 28, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Allen C. Lynch, “The Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy in the 1990s”, *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, vol.18, no.1, 2002, p. 166.

Regarding the former Soviet republics of the "common neighbourhood", Russia had cordial relations in that period only with Armenia and Belarus, with the later forming a union state since 1996. Moldova, Georgia and Azerbaijan attempted to promote Radical Westernizing orientations, in the manner of the three Baltic States with their independence, failing though and "getting" instead civil wars and loss of central control over separatist enclaves<sup>14</sup>. All three countries have reluctantly become the CIS members: fearing the economic blockade and hoping to solve the separatist conflict, Moldova signed the agreement of joining the CIS; however, the parliament ratified it only in April 1994. Azerbaijan withdrew from the CIS in October 1992 and turned to Turkey for assistance in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, signing even a deal to build a new oil pipeline from Baku to the Turkish port of Ceyhan. However, the coup of June 1993, where many saw Russia's fingerprints<sup>15</sup>, brought Heidar Aliiev to power, a former Politburo member, who, in gratitude, rejoined the CIS in September 1993 and suspended the talks with Western companies on oil and pipeline development. Decided to remain outside the CIS, Georgia was also obliged to join the Russian-led organization in 1993<sup>16</sup>. In the context of intensified fighting in Abkhazia and the resurgence of Gamsakhurdia forces in western Georgia, in both cases Russian hand being obviously seen<sup>17</sup>, and internationally isolated, Tbilisi joined the CIS and gave Russia five bases on its territory, in exchange for brokering peace with Abkhazia and help against Gamsakhurdia.

Even the second biggest Slavic republic tried to consolidate its independence from Russia and restricted its involvement within the CIS to a "fake participation". Kiev did not withdraw from the organization fearing territorial losses, president Yeltsin clearly stating that Russia would recognize Ukraine's borders only within the CIS borders, however, the parliament has not ratified the CIS Charter, and, thus Ukraine is not *de jure* a the CIS member, its involvement in the organization being defined as "participant"<sup>18</sup>. Furthermore, the country had tried to establish an anti-Russian cordon sanitaire in 1993 under the label of a Baltic-Black Sea alliance of states lying between Russia and Germany<sup>19</sup>, and later became the catalyst of the GUAM.

The unsuccessful military campaign in Chechnya in 1994-1996 showed Russia's weakness and boosted the countries from the "near abroad". Azerbaijan encouraged multinational companies to invest in its energy

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<sup>14</sup> Taras Kuzio, "Geopolitical Pluralism in the CIS: The Emergence of GUUAM", *European Security*, vol.9, no.2, 2000, p. 82.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Kubicek, "Russian Foreign Policy and the West", *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 114, no. 4, Winter, 1999-2000, p. 562.

<sup>16</sup> Jyotsna Bakshi, "Russia's National Security Concepts and Military Doctrines: Continuity and Change", *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 24, no.7, 2000, p. 1272.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Kubicek, "Russian Foreign Policy...cit.", p. 563.

<sup>18</sup> Taras Kuzio, "Geopolitical Pluralism...cit.", p. 84.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 89.

resources in order to eliminate the economic dependency on Russia, Georgia was repeatedly accusing Russian peace-keepers of siding with Abkhazian separatists<sup>20</sup>, Moldova was striving to approach the EU, while Ukraine was backing the NATO expansion and upgraded relations with the NATO to a special partnership<sup>21</sup>. In 1997, these countries established in Strasbourg the GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova), an organization that pursues integration into transatlantic and European structures in trying to diminish the dependence of its members on Russia<sup>22</sup>. The four former Soviet republics were seeking also to deprive the right of the CIS to represent them in international organizations, to prevent the use of economic levers by Russia to obtain strategic concessions through the CIS, and were opposing to the right of the CIS to resolve armed conflicts within the CIS<sup>23</sup>. Georgia and Azerbaijan looking instead to the USA to help them solve the internal protracted conflicts. The anti-Russian orientation of the GUAM was confirmed by the attendance of its members of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary the NATO summit in Washington in April 1999, during the NATO's bombardment in Serbia, where Uzbekistan joined the organization, transforming the acronym in the GUUAM.

The inception of the GUAM/GUUAM was proving that Russia was steadily loosing influence in the former Soviet republics. "The reaching of the agreement on the Baku Ceyhan pipeline in November 1999 was confirming this assessment. Primakov stated on several occasions that the great power status did not come cheaply and that Russia should pay the economic price for reintegrating the old empire, directly or indirectly<sup>24</sup>. However, the Kremlin did not have the necessary economic and military capabilities for achieving its declared goals of consolidating Russia's positions in the 'near abroad'".

## **“NEAR ABROAD” AT THE TURN OF THE MILLENNIUM**

When Putin came to power in December 1999, Russian foreign policy was in disarray. Relations with the West had deteriorated after the Kosovo war, while the ties with Russia's neighbours had atrophied<sup>25</sup>. In one of his first public speeches, the new president announced that the relations with the CIS members

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<sup>20</sup> Tassos T. Fakiolas, Efstathios T. Fakiolas, "Russia's Grand Strategic...cit.", p. 388.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Kubicek, , "Russian Foreign Policy...cit.", p. 561.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Rywkin, "Russia and the Near Abroad...cit.", p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> Taras Kuzio, "Geopolitical Pluralism...cit.", p. 94.

<sup>24</sup> Allen C. Lynch, "The Evolution of Russian...cit.", p. 167.

<sup>25</sup> Angela E. Stent, "Restoration and Revolution in Putin's Foreign Policy", *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 60, no. 6, 2008, p. 1090.

would be a priority for him, making clear that the former Soviet republics were of great geopolitical and geostrategic importance for the Kremlin. The interest towards the "near abroad" was also recorded by the National Security Concept of the Russian Federation, adopted on January 10, 2000. The document states the development of Russia's relations with the CIS members in accordance with "principles of international law" and in the manner "of meeting Russia's interests"<sup>26</sup>.

The new president took a much more pragmatic attitude to the "near abroad" than his predecessor. Putin made it clear that the CIS was not going to be anymore a "posthumous version of the Soviet Union, a 'politburo of equals' with the leaders of the now independent republics seemingly enjoying equality with the Moscow boss"<sup>27</sup>, that the former Soviet republics have to comply with Russia's security parameters and "they can no longer expect concessional treatment as with 'buddy Yeltsin' and get away with it"<sup>28</sup>, they had to meet "Russia's interests". This trend was reinforced a year later by the then Secretary of the Security Council, Sergei Ivanov, when he publicly acknowledged that previous attempts to integrate the CIS had come at a very high price, and that Russia must now abandon the integration project in favor of a 'pragmatic' course of bilateral relations. It has to be noticed that at that moment the CIS state's debt to Russia had reached \$5.5 billion<sup>29</sup>.

Putin's determination in its policy towards the CIS was enhanced by a combination of internal and external factors. The rising oil prices helped Russia to recover shortly from the economic crisis, the victory over Chechen insurgency restored confidence in country's might, the centralization of power and the defeat of oligarchs stabilized the country, while the closeness between Russia and the USA after 11 September 2001 made Putin anticipate that in return for supporting the American anti-terrorist campaign Washington would recognize Russia's sphere of influence in the "near abroad", as long as, from the Kremlin's perspective it is natural that great powers have special influence in their neighbourhood, as the USA does in the Latin America<sup>30</sup>.

Thus, having the economic power and internationally consolidated positions, Putin took more decisive and stronger attitude in its relations with the former Soviet republics. The Kremlin put pressure on Georgia to allow Russian troops to pursue Chechen rebels into its territory, Moscow resisted to withdraw

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<sup>26</sup> See Концепция национальной безопасности Российской Федерации 2000[National Security Concept of the Russian Federation 2000], <http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/ns-osndoc.nsf/e2f289bea62097f9c325787a0034c255/b8d88f7503bc644fc325752e0047174b!OpenDocument>, last accessed August 28, 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Dmitri Trenin, "Russia's Spheres of Interest, not Influence", *The Washington Quarterly*, vol.32, no.4, 2009, p. 9.

<sup>28</sup> Jyotsna Bakshi, "Russia's National Security...cit.", p. 1283.

<sup>29</sup> Andrei P. Tsygankov, "If Not by Tanks, Then by Banks? The Role of Soft Power in Putin's Foreign Policy", *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol.58, no.7, 2006, p. 1082.

<sup>30</sup> Angela E. Stent, "Restoration and Revolution...cit.", p. 1095.



its forces from Moldova and Georgia, as it promised at the OSCE's 1999 conference, put pressure on the GUUAM and tried to "convince" Azerbaijan to give up the idea of construction of Baku-Ceyhan pipeline<sup>31</sup>. Putin showed also his readiness to play the diaspora card in Moldova and Ukraine to justify his efforts to gain influence. In June 2000, Russian president declared that "Russia is interested in Moldova being a territorially whole, independent state. But this cannot be achieved unless the interests of all population groups, including [the] Transdniester population, are observed"<sup>32</sup>. Furthermore, the threat of secessionism was enforced by the December 17, 2001, constitutional law "On the procedure for the admittance/acceptance to the Russian Federation and the founding within its framework of a New Subject of the Russian Federation" – a clear warning for the former Soviet republics that Moscow could decide to "admit" Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, or some other regions within its own borders<sup>33</sup>.

In addition, where was possible, Putin has tried to replace pro-Western politicians in the CIS countries with pro-Moscow figures. Thus, Moscow pressured Kiev to fire the foreign minister Tarasyuk, in November 2000 and the prime-minister Yushchenko, in May 2001 and appointed the former chairman of Gazprom and former Russian prime-minister, Viktor Chernomyrdin, ambassador to Kiev with the aim of taking advantage of Ukraine's main economic weakness – the dependence on Russian energy<sup>34</sup>. The FSB, Russian intelligence service, has also helped Ukrainian police arrest the former energy minister and opposition leader Iulia Tymoshenko, in February 2001, on the basis of five-year-old bribery charges<sup>35</sup>. Within this context of Russia's intrusion in domestic policies of the "near abroad" we can assume that Moscow must have had also a "contribution" in the discredit of Chişinău's pro-European Sturza Government and in the victory of pro-Russian Party of Communists of Republic of Moldova in 2001 parliamentary elections.

These examples are a clear reflection of the fact that Russia did not regard the former Soviet republics as full-fledged independent states to be dealt with on an equal basis but as 'subjects' of its sphere of influence<sup>36</sup>. The project of a liberal empire, announced by Anatoly Chubais in 2003 comes only to support this statement. The former head of Russia's privatization presented the liberal empire as the only viable project for securing market and democratic reforms in the CIS, assuming that the West would endorse it. In Chubais'

<sup>31</sup> Michael Rywkin, "Russia and the Near...cit.", p. 9.

<sup>32</sup> Stephen J. Blank, "Putin's Twelve-Step Program", *The Washington Quarterly*, vol.25, no.1, 2002, p.155.

<sup>33</sup> Gennadi Kurdiukov, Katlijn Malfliet, "Integration by Absorption: New Subjects to the Russian Federation", in Katlijn Malfliet, Lien Verpoest, Evgeny Vinokurov (eds.), *The CIS, the EU and Russia. The Challenges of Integration*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 208.

<sup>34</sup> Michael Rywkin, "Russia and the Near...cit.", p. 9.

<sup>35</sup> Stephen J. Blank, "Putin's Twelve-Step...cit.", p. 154.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Rywkin, "Russia and the Near...cit.", p. 4.

opinion, in return for a free market and a stable Russia and surrounding region, the West would have to recognize Russia's sphere of influence<sup>37</sup>. And even if the "colour revolutions" prevented the building of the liberal empire, elements of this projects, like "promotion of the expansion of domestic business in the neighbouring countries both in trade and in the acquisition and development of assets", left their mark on Moscow's policy towards the "near abroad".

## THE BLOODLESS WARS

The "rose revolution" in Georgia and the "orange revolution" in Ukraine were a clear reflection of the will of former Soviet republics to break with their recent past and to engage in an effective reform process that would enable their rapprochement with the West. However, the defeat of pro-Russian leaders in Tbilisi and Kiev came as a real political earthquake for Moscow. The most dramatic failure was perceived in Ukraine, where the Kremlin poured substantial resources into supporting Yanukovich, president Kuchma's designated heir<sup>38</sup>. For Putin such behavior of the near abroad was unacceptable. Seeing the West's involvement in the "colour revolutions" and aware of the strategic importance of the "near abroad", especially for the export of oil and gas – the key of Russia's powerful revival, Moscow sought to secure its rising revenues and strengthen its positions even in the friendly-neighbour republics so that to prevent any new "color" uprising. What followed was labeled by many scholars as *economization* of Russian foreign policy, translated into the increasing of gas price for the former Soviet republics, acquisition of strategic infrastructure of these states through assets-for-debt agreements and trade blackmail; and a more active use of protracted separatist conflicts in the "near abroad" in order to put more pressure on the central "disobedient" governments.

### *The "Energodiplomacy" in the "Near Abroad"*

What the USSR sought to achieve with nuclear weapons, Russia under Putin was trying to achieve with oil and gas – increased political influence over its neighbours and the EU<sup>39</sup>. The clearest example in this sense is the "gas offensive" on "near abroad" that followed the "colour revolutions". In fact the

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<sup>37</sup> Anatolii Chubais, "Missiya Rossii v XXI veke", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 1<sup>st</sup> October 2003, [http://www.ng.ru/ideas/2003-10-01/1\\_mission.html](http://www.ng.ru/ideas/2003-10-01/1_mission.html), last accessed May 3, 2014.

<sup>38</sup> Angela E. Stent, "Restoration and Revolution...cit.", p. 1100.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p.1094.

idea of using energy weapons for influencing the post Soviet countries did not appear after the popular revolts in Georgia and Ukraine. It was developed by the doctrine of Liberal Empire but has been implemented in all countries analyzed in the present paper immediately after the democratic revolutions in the “near abroad”.

Thus, shortly after Yushchenko was installed as president, Russia, through the state-owned Gazprom, demanded Ukraine sharp increased price for gas, from \$50 per thousand cubic meters (tcm) to \$160 per tcm and then to \$230 per tcm, arguing the necessity of adjustment to the current market price. Kiev resisted, motivating that an existing agreement guaranteed a low price until 2009<sup>40</sup>. Consequently, on 31 December 2005, Gazprom cut off natural gas supplies to Ukraine, which made Kiev divert some gas transiting the country to the European customers to its own use. After protests of the European governments, Gazprom resumed gas deliveries on January 2, and two days later a preliminary agreement between Gazprom and Ukraine was reached. In 2007, the two parts agreed to gradually increase the price of Russian gas supplied to Ukraine over the next five years, until it reached the world market price<sup>41</sup>. However, the frictions have resumed shortly. After the narrow victory of pro-Western parties in the Ukrainian September 2007 parliamentary elections, Gazprom suddenly asked Ukraine to pay its \$ 1.3 billion gas debts in less than a month; in March 2008 Gazprom reduced gas supplies by 50% because of the disagreement on the price Ukraine should have paid for gas delivered in January and February 2008, the supplies being restored after two days; while on January 1, 2009, Russia stopped gas supplies to Ukraine, and on January 6 – all deliveries through Ukraine to the rest of Europe, causing the worst gas crisis up then. It was only on January 18 that Russia and Ukraine reached an agreement and the gas supplies to Europe was resumed on January 20, after 13 days of cold winter.

Moldova was also affected by the 2005-2006 Russian “gas offensive”. At the end of 2005, Gazprom announced Moldovan authorities that it intended to double the price of natural gas. As Chişinău opposed, on January 1, 2006, Gazprom halted natural gas supply to Moldova. The crisis lasted until mid-January, when the two sides agreed to increase the price for Moldovan recipients from \$80 per tcm to \$110 per tcm, after which it rose to \$160 per tcm, explained by some specialist as a “punishment” for Chişinău’s pro-Western policy<sup>42</sup>. In December 2006 the two sides reached an agreement, which

<sup>40</sup> Jim Nichol, Steven Woehrel, Bernard A. Gelb, “Russia’s Cutoff of Natural Gas to Ukraine: Context and Implications”, *CRS Report for Congress*, February 15, 2006, p. 2.

<sup>41</sup> Steven Woehrel, “Russian Energy Policy Toward Neighboring Countries”, *CRS Report for Congress*, prepared for members and committees of Congress, May 20, 2009, p. 8.

<sup>42</sup> Grzegorz Gromadzki, Wojciech Kononczuk, *Energy Game. Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus between the EU and Russia*, Stefan Batory Foundation, Warsaw, 2007, p. 22.

provided that Moldova would pay \$170 per tcm in 2007 and the price would gradually increase up to \$250 per tcm in 2011. In addition, Gazprom received 13% Transnistria's stake in MoldovaGaz, increasing thus the percentage of its shares in Moldova's owner of natural gas pipelines to 63.4%.

Much the same pattern followed the gas dispute in Georgia in 2006. At the end of 2005 Gazprom announced Tbilisi of its intentions to substantially increase the price of gas. In January 2006 unknown saboteurs bombed Tbilisi Mozdok pipeline in North Ossetia, stopping temporarily gas supplies to Georgia. The incident coincided with the explosion on an electricity supply line near Georgian border and was labeled as a deliberate act of sabotage by Georgian president Saakashvili who insinuated a link between the explosions and the dispute over gas prices<sup>43</sup>. In November 2006, Gazprom threaten Tbilisi that it would cut off gas supplies by the end of the year if Georgia did not agree to an increased price or sold its main gas pipeline to Gazprom<sup>44</sup>. However, in mid-2006, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline was completed, and in March 2007, the South Caucasus gas pipeline (Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum) started transporting gas from Azerbaijan to Turkey via Georgia, allowing Tbilisi to lessen its dependence on Russia.

Gazprom attempts to impose higher prices to Azerbaijan made Baku decide not to import natural gas from Russia anymore. In addition, the State Oil Company of the Azerbaijani Republic (SOCAR) halted on January 1, 2007, its oil exports to Russia via Baku-Novorossiisk pipeline for three months, arguing that the oil was needed to be used as fuel for Azerbaijani power stations that used to ran on Russian gas<sup>45</sup>.

Neither the "friendly" neighbours have escaped Russian gas pressure. In January 2006, Armenia was announced by Gazprom of its intentions to double the price of Russian gas, from \$56 per tcm to \$110 per tcm. Depending totally on Russian supplies, in May, the country ceded various energy assets to Russian firms as partial payment for this price increase and in October the same year, Armenian officials announced that Gazprom would assume management control of the Iranian-Armenian gas pipeline, then under construction.

The last neighbour encountering Russian "economization" of foreign policy was Belarus. Member of the state union, the most loyal former Soviet republic used to receive natural gas at Russia's domestic prices. However, in April 2006, deputy CEO of Gazprom declared that the rate of natural gas

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<sup>43</sup> BBC, "Russia Blamed for 'gas sabotage'", January 22, 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4637034.stm>, last accessed May 10, 2014.

<sup>44</sup> Steven Woehrel, "Russian Energy Policy...cit.", p. 11.

<sup>45</sup> Sergei Blagov, "Russian Ties with Azerbaijan Reach New Lows", *Eurasianet.org*, January 24, 2007, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav012507.shtml>, last accessed June 22, 2014.

supplied to Belarus “should be at least three times higher”<sup>46</sup>, meaning around \$140 per tcm. Belarus was threatened with a cut off in supplies on January 1, 2007, if did not agree to pay the higher price. The gas shutoff was prevented by an agreement reached just hours before the deadline, on December 31, 2006. Belarus accepted an increase in the price of gas from \$46, 68 per tcm to \$100 per tcm and a gradually adjustment, reaching the world market levels in 2011. Additionally, Belarus agreed to sell Gazprom 50 percent of the stock in Beltransgaz, the Belarusian gas pipeline company<sup>47</sup>.

However, the conflict between the two countries erupted again a week after over the price of oil. The dispute was started by Moscow’s decision to impose a duty of \$180 per ton on oil exports to Belarus. In response, Minsk decided to increase the custom duties on the transport of Russian oil through Belarus to \$45 per ton. Russia stopped pumping oil to Europe via Druzba pipeline, which crosses Belarus, accusing its neighbour of siphoning off oil. After negotiations, Belarus cancelled its customs duties on oil, while Russia reduced the export customs for oil delivered to Belarus from \$180 to \$53 per tcm.

Within the context of “energodiplomacy” fit as well the *asset-for-debt strategy*. Initiated during Putin’s first term, this policy consists of forcing the indebted CIS countries to cede Russia their strategic assets in exchange for debts. At the beginning it was the electricity production and distribution of countries in the “near abroad” that were affected. Through this strategy, the Russian Unified Energy Systems (UES), headed by Anatoly Chubais, the author of the liberal empire theory, acquired 75% share in a Georgian electricity distribution company, obtained the right to manage several power plants and owned 50% of the Transenergy nuclear power plant and all of the Mitkvari power plant. In Armenia, UES came to control 100% of the country’s electricity production and distribution<sup>48</sup>.

The policy of assets-for-debt was used more effectively during 2005-2006 gas offensive. With strong energy leverage during the cold winter, Moscow has succeeded in increasing its stake in Moldova’s pipeline system, bought the main Georgian gas pipeline, took control over the under construction Iranian-Armenian pipeline and received half of the stock in Belarusian pipeline company (in 2011, Russia took total control over Belarusian pipeline system).

Of course, these actions have strengthened Russia’s positions in the “near abroad” allowing Moscow to put more pressure on the governments of the former Soviet republics, on the other side, however, the gas wars and the acquisition of strategic assets have disappointed the ordinary people from these

<sup>46</sup> RiaNovosti, “Gazprom to Raise Gas Prices for Belarus from 2007”, April 10, 2006, <http://en.rian.ru/analysis/20060410/45529226.html>, last accessed June 22, 2014.

<sup>47</sup> Oleg Aleksandrov, “The Crisis in Russian-Belarusian Relations”, *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 15, February 2007, p.12.

<sup>48</sup> Bertil Nygren, *The Rebuilding of Greater Russia. Putin’s Foreign Policy towards the CIS Countries*, Routledge, 2008, p. 244.

countries, providing the necessary public support to their political leaders in the decision of reorienting the foreign policy towards the West.

### *From "Food Wars" to Deportations*

Within the context of *economization* of Russian foreign policy the "food wars" with the former Soviet republics played an important role. Aiming to put pressure on its neighbours the Kremlin did not hesitate to hit on the main exports of these countries. And the imposition of periodic trade embargos and other economic sanctions on countries dependent on Russian market access can be a strong source of political pressure<sup>49</sup>.

Still affected by the gas wars, in March 2006, Russia put an import ban on both Moldovan and Georgian wines, on grounds that they contained dangerous substances; in particular pesticides and hard metals, and that many drinks were falsified. At that moment both Moldova and Georgia were depended on the proportion of 80-90% on Russian market for they total wine export<sup>50</sup>. Five weeks later, Russia banned another Georgia's prominent export – Borjomi and Nabeglavi mineral water accusing that the products failed to meet water purity standards. This embargos came within the context of Georgia's efforts to join NATO and Moldova's pro-Western orientation. Furthermore, Putin had apparently inserted the wine trade as an issue in the negotiations with Moldova on Transnistrian conflict<sup>51</sup>. In late 2007, amid warming of relations between Chişinău and Moscow, Russia lifted the ban on Moldovan wine, the embargo on Georgian products remaining in force, however.

Also in 2006, Russia boycotted Belarusian sugar, accusing Minsk of "dumpling" by exporting cheap sugar made from imported Cuban sugar cane, arguing that the agreements with Russia on the Belarusian sugar exports applied only to the sugar made of the local beets<sup>52</sup>. The dispute ended in 2007, when Belarus agreed to cut its exports of sugar to the Russian market.

That Russian "food wars" had punitive character and only apparent consumer protection aims is proved also by their most recent forms. One month

<sup>49</sup> Janusz Bugajski, "Russia's Pragmatic Reimperialization", *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, vol. 4, no. 1, Winter 2010, p. 13.

<sup>50</sup> BBC, "Russian Wine Moves Draws Protests", March 30, 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4860454.stm>, last accessed July 10, 2014.

<sup>51</sup> Valdimir Socor, "Russia Hints at Limited Return of Georgian and Moldovan Wines to its Market", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 4, issue 129, July 3, 2007, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=32844](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=32844), last accessed July 10, 2014.

<sup>52</sup> Belarus Digest, "Trade Wars with Russia: From Sugar to Airlines", April 2, 2012, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/trade-wars-russia-sugar-airlines-8639>, last accessed July 11, 2014.

after the launch of the EaP, Russia imposed a ban on Belarusian milk and dairy products, citing Belarus' failure to meet Russian new sanitary regulations. In August 2010, a new ban was introduced on imports on Moldovan wine, ahead of parliamentary elections, planned in autumn; in February 2012, Ukrainian cheese was banned on Russian market because would have contained palm oil; while in March 2012, Russia threatened to restrict Azerbaijani exports of fruits and vegetables, in the context of negotiations of a Russian radar station on its territory.

In the category of economic wars fits also the 2006 deportation of Georgians from Russia. As retaliation to the arresting by Georgian authorities of four Russian citizens on charges of espionage in September 2006, the Kremlin suspended transport and communication links to Georgia and stopped issuing visas to Georgian citizens, aiming at preventing Georgian migrant workers in Russia from sending money back home. This decision was shortly followed by a campaign of expelling Georgians who were in Russia illegally and discrediting of those who remained, the anti-Georgian media campaign provoking discriminatory actions against Georgian owners of food and entertainment venues in Russian cities. There was little doubt that these sanctions were intended to encourage Georgian people to bring down Saakashvili<sup>53</sup>. Giving the fact that at that time it was estimated that more than a fifth of Georgia's 4.4 million people (almost 1 million) were working in Russia<sup>54</sup> their remittances sent home reaching \$1 billion annually, that represented 20-25% of Georgia's GDP<sup>55</sup>, Russia's actions could not be interpreted only as attempts to destabilize Georgia.

## THE SECESSIONIST CARD

As one can notice, Russian offensive towards the former Soviet republics became more assertive, better coordinated and quickly triggered after the "colour revolutions". This trend was already hinted in April 2005, when president Putin addressed Russian nation telling that the demise of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century, setting thus, the course of Russian foreign policy towards great power status including neo-imperialist aspirations<sup>56</sup>. As some analysts have pointed out, after the "colour revolutions", Russia has

<sup>53</sup> Peter J.S. Duncan, "Russia, the West and the 2007–2008 Electoral Cycle: Did the Kremlin Really Fear a 'Coloured Revolution'?", *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 65, no. 1, 2012, p. 15.

<sup>54</sup> "Georgia Gets Warning on 'anti-Russia' Stance", *International Herald Tribune*, October 5, 2006.

<sup>55</sup> Andrei P. Tsygankov, "If Not by Tanks...cit.", p. 1092.

<sup>56</sup> Dieter Dettke, "Europe and Russia: From Neighborhood without a Shared Vision to a Modernization Partnership", *European Security*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2011, p. 130.

abandoned the idea of CIS as a liberal trade community and there has been a consistent effort to reassert Russia's traditional sphere of influence<sup>57</sup>. The protracted conflicts in the former Soviet republics played an important role in this context.

For the Kremlin the secessionist conflicts are an important instrument for keeping its grip on the "near abroad". Moscow uses them in order to prevent the advent of any hostile bloc or organization towards its borders and put a great pressure on the former Soviet republics. On the one side, the secessionist regions in the "near abroad" are characterized by a general lack of democratic progress. The external (Russian) support is the only one that keeps them alive and thriving, the breakaway regions being aware of their dependence on this support, and consequently, allows Moscow a significant say on their internal matters. Hence, Russian support to the secessionist regions creates increasingly "undemocratic reserved policy domains" within the former Soviet republics that severely restrict the effective power to rule of the democratically elected central governments of the former Soviet republics<sup>58</sup>. On the other side neither the NATO nor the EU are willing to integrate states with internal territorial disputes. Therefore, supporting the secessionist conflicts in the former Soviet republics, Moscow keeps a great leverage over both internal and external policies of its neighbours.

Thus, on 25-27 January 2005, just days after the end of the "orange revolution", the leaders of secessionist Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia met in Moscow with the Russian First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Valery Loshchinin and with Duma chairman, Boris Gryzlov. Two months later, leaders of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh came again to Moscow, where met separately with the Russian presidential administration, government, military and Duma officials. These meetings took place not at all at random, on the contrary, they were meant to warn the former Soviet republics and reassess Moscow's privileged role in negotiations of protracted conflicts in Moldova and Caucasus.

Seeing its geopolitical interests endangered in Ukraine after the "orange revolution", Russia sought to warm the separatist card in Crimea too. The Kremlin intensified its passportization policy and three extremist pro-Russian youth movements opened branches in Ukrainian peninsula: the Eurasian Youth Union – a subdivision of the international movement founded by Russian nationalist Alexander Dugin, a Moscow State University professor with close ties to the Kremlin<sup>59</sup>; Proryv and Nashy, both with branches in Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

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<sup>57</sup> Antoaneta Dimitrova, Rilka Dragneva, "Constraining External Governance: Interdependence with Russia and the CIS as Limits to the EU's Rule Transfer in the Ukraine", *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 16, no. 6, 2009, p. 864.

<sup>58</sup> Jakob Tolstrup, "Studying a Negative External Actor: Russia's Management of Stability and Instability in the 'Near Abroad'", *Democratization*, vol. 16, no. 5, 2009, p. 936.

<sup>59</sup> Anton Shekhovtsov, Andreas Umland, "Is Aleksandr Dugin a Traditionalist? 'Neo-Eurasianism' and Perennial Philosophy", *Russian Review*, vol. 68, issue 4, 2009, pp. 662-678.



## **ESTRANGING THE “NEAR ABROAD”, PROPELLING THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP**

The former Soviet space is perceived by the Kremlin as very important for its security and energy resources and infrastructure. Therefore, Moscow has sought to prevent the former Soviet countries from approaching with the West, especially with the United States and to secure its energy transition to the European market. However, Russian assertive policy towards the “near abroad”, especially during Putin’s second term, did not reach fully the expected results. If Russia succeeded in imposing itself on its neighbours using especially economic tools, there were the same means that estranged in fact the former Soviet republics from Moscow, making them look to the West for guarantors of their sovereignty.

Russia’s oil and gas exports have been the main factors of the country’s economic revival, and reaffirmation as a great power on international arena. Therefore, the ensuring of unimpeded transit for its gas and oil across the territories of the former Soviet republics to the European Union in particular, preventing the construction of pipelines to the EU outside its territory and to gain access to the CIS countries own energy and other important resources represent paramount issues for Russia’s might and stability, as loosing its position on the European market and the monopoly on export routes would put Russia in the position of competing with other export outlets<sup>60</sup>. On the other side, by raising gas prices for the former Soviet republics, even for the most loyal one, Russia sought to show its neighbours “who is the boss” in the region, to pump more money into the federal budget and to force these countries to sell Russia their strategic assets, especially in the energy area. However, Moscow’s heavy handedness undercuts its influence with its neighbours pushing them to seek closer relations with the West. The gas offensive did not but worried the former Soviet republics that Russia may use their energy dependency to interfere in their domestic affairs or to put pressure on them to make more and more foreign policy concessions<sup>61</sup>. As a result, the aggressive Russian “energodiplomacy” towards Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus gave an added momentum to these countries’ interest in forging

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<sup>60</sup> Mustafa Aydin, Neslihan Kaptanoglu, “Regionalization of Great Power...cit.”, p. 766.

<sup>61</sup> Steven Woehrel, “Russian Energy Policy...cit.”, p. 1.

closer relations with NATO, the EU and the US<sup>62</sup>, hoping that that way could strengthen their sovereignty. Gazprom's demands for a gas price hike, for instance, have prompted unprecedented debates in Armenia about the value of the strategic partnership with Russia and shocked Belarus, setting practically the stage for these countries for joining the EaP, an initiative not regarded well by Russia.

Even more dangerous was perceived Moscow's asset-for-debt strategy. While Russia's policy of buying strategic assets in the CIS countries helps the Kremlin to play the modern integration game – political integration as a consequence of economic integration and not vice versa, a strategy that allows Russian capital to simply swallow economies of the former Soviet republics<sup>63</sup> – this fact rouse concerns of the former Soviet republics that by controlling strategic assets in their countries, Russia would be able to manipulate the internal political situation, restraining thus their sovereignty. The situation was getting more tense giving the fact that all these states have built their statehood in opposition to Russia<sup>64</sup> and in the context of Putin's declaration about the collapse of the Soviet Union as the greatest geopolitical disaster of the century, read by many analysts as a "[setting] of the course of Russian foreign policy toward great power status including neo-imperialist aspirations"<sup>65</sup>, there were no doubts that the Kremlin would not hesitate to infringe their sovereignty whenever considers its interest at stake.

As a result, even Putin's ties with Lukashenko became testy. The political union between Russia and Belarus did not move closer to realization, the ties with Moldova damaged too, Voronin declaring officially his European aspirations, Azerbaijan continued to carefully establish closer relations with the West (supplied cheap energy to Georgia, participated in the GUAM, cooperated militarily with the United States) taking care, at the same time, not to exacerbate friction with Russia<sup>66</sup>, Ukraine and Georgia were pushing for the NATO membership and expressed European aspiration, while Armenia was questioning the strategic partnership with Russia.

Russia's relationship with the "near abroad" was stained even more by the "economic wars". While the increase of gas prices could have been "accepted" as a "need" to regulate the relations of independency between Russia and the CIS countries, the adjustment to the market price being a proof of strictly economic cooperation, in the case of the "food wars" or the expulsion of Georgians from Russia no one doubted the punitive nature of those actions.

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<sup>62</sup> Eugene B. Rumer, "Putin's Foreign Policy – A Matter of Interest", *The Adelphi Papers*, vol. 47, no. 390, 2007, p. 27.

<sup>63</sup> Bertil Nygren, *The Rebuilding of Greater...* cit. p. 221.

<sup>64</sup> Dmitri Trenin, "Russia's Spheres ...cit.", p. 19.

<sup>65</sup> Dieter Dettke, "Europe and Russia...cit.", p. 130.

<sup>66</sup> Angela E. Stent, "Restoration and Revolution..." p. 1101.

For the affected countries those were attempts of state destabilizing, while for the other former Soviet republics – warnings that Russia has no hesitation to use any means for securing its loyalty even if it meant destabilizing or alteration of its neighbours sovereignty. These economic wars estranged even Russia's union partner. Thus, in Belarus, the dictatorial and culturally Soviet president Lukashenko became father of national independence<sup>67</sup>. During the milk war, he accused Russia of trying to take control of Belarus' industries and destroy its sovereignty adding that a confederation with Russia and Belarus would create "another Chechnya", suggesting that Belarus would use military force to defend its independence<sup>68</sup>, and that "Belarus is conducting its own independent domestic and foreign policy" and that it "did not want to become an appendage of Russia, particularly an economic one", according to a member of Belarusian Parliament<sup>69</sup>.

Along with the economic problems generated by trade embargos, the energy dependence and discredit of transit countries, the possession of strategic assets in the near abroad, Russian "game" in the protracted conflicts had also the opposite result than the alienation of the former Soviet republics from the West. The Kozak memorandum, Russian proposal of managing Transnistrian issue, was the factor that determined Moldovan Communist government to U-turn the country's foreign policy towards the European integration. Showing clearly how little price Moscow was putting on Moldova's sovereignty through the Kremlin's plan of asymmetric federalization of the former soviet republic<sup>70</sup>, Russia had nothing but determined Chişinău to look for guarantors of its independence. The same reaction had Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, especially after the 2006 meetings of the separatist leaders in Moscow. Being clear that Russia is using the separatist conflicts against the central governments of the former Soviet republics, these countries sought rapprochement with NATO and the EU for solving their protracted conflicts.

The estrangement of the "near abroad" and the former Soviet republics' choice of rapprochement with the West coincided with the EU's growing interest towards this region. The 2004-2007 enlargements brought new Eastern neighbours on the EU's borders, and made the EU a Black Sea power. However not only did this extension grow the EU' influence and importance on the international arena, but it brought also new threats and responsibilities, as "what happens in the countries in Eastern Europe and Southern Caucasus affects the

<sup>67</sup> Dmitri Trenin, "Russia's Spheres... p. 19.

<sup>68</sup> Steve Gutterman, "Belarus Raises Stakes in Dispute with Russia", *The Guardian*, June 14, 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/feedarticle/8557701>, last accessed July 10, 2014.

<sup>69</sup> Ellen Barry, "'Milk War' Strains Russia-Belarus Ties", *International Herald Tribune*, June 14, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/15/world/europe/15belarus.html>.

<sup>70</sup> Cătălin Gomboş, Dragoş C. Mateescu, „Moldova's political self and the energy conundrum in the context of the European Neighbourhood Policy”, *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies*, vol. 6, issue 1, 2012, p. 56.

European Union [...] their security, stability and prosperity increasingly impact on the EU's" (see EEAS). Therefore, in order to ensure its own security Brussels had to ensure stable governance on its borders, and thus had to address the threats that came from the new Eastern neighbours, such as poverty, migration, transnational crime, etc.<sup>71</sup>. Thus, in 2004, the EU launched the European Neighbourhood Policy "with the objective of avoiding the emergence of new dividing lines between the enlarged EU and [the new] neighbours and instead strengthened the prosperity, stability and security of all" (European Commission), seeking thus to extend a European "postmodern" security community across the EU and create a "ring of well governed countries".

The commitment to the European ideal, principles and community of values of the "near abroad" highlighted by the "color revolutions" along with Russia's aggressive offensive that followed, put the EU in front of the need for a more focused strategy on the Eastern neighbours. Russia's attempts to destabilize the economies of these countries and the danger of warning of the "frozen conflicts" put at risk the stability and security of the EU. Furthermore, the 2008 Georgian War put the former Soviet republics in front of a great dilemma: how to ensure their own security<sup>72</sup>, and at the same time alerted the EU about how far is the Kremlin ready to go in its policies towards the 'near abroad'. It was obvious that a greater involvement of Brussels in the Eastern neighbourhood was both expected and needed. Within this context, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative fitted perfectly.

Thus, initiated by Poland and Sweden before the Georgia War, the EaP was rushed by the events of August 2008. With the aim to "deepen and to intensify bilateral relations between the EU and the partner countries" (Council of European Union 2009), marking "a step change in relations with these partners [...] responding to the need for a clearer signal of EU commitment"<sup>73</sup> towards the Eastern neighbours, the EaP was launched on May 7, 2009, in Prague. The initiative was immediately criticized by Moscow, Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, accusing the EU of trying to carve out a new sphere of influence in Russia's region of "privileged interests". Brussels' answer that the EaP is not an anti-Russian alliance or a sphere of influence, and that the EU "is responding to the demands of [its Eastern neighbours]"<sup>74</sup> did not convince Moscow.

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<sup>71</sup> Paul Flenley, "Russia and the EU: The Clash of New Neighbourhoods?", *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, vol.16, no.2, 2008, p. 190.

<sup>72</sup> Fiodor Lukianov, "Rezultaty voiny s Iuzhnoi Osetii mogut izmeninti vsiu konfiguratzyiu otnoshenii Rossiei s Zapadom", *REGNUM News Agency Web Site*, August 22, 2008, <http://www.regnum.ru/news/1045270.html>, last accessed August 16, 2014.

<sup>73</sup> European Commission, European Neighbourhood Policy, [http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/policy\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/policy_en.htm), last accessed August 20, 2014.

<sup>74</sup> BBC, "EU Reaches out to Troubled East", May 7, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8035710.stm>, last accessed August 16, 2014.

For the Kremlin the EU became a serious competitor in the “near abroad”.

Until the launch of the EaP, Moscow saw the EU as a relatively benign international organization, a strategic ally in its desire for a multipolar world. More concerned of the USA’s foreign policy, Russia saw the EU enlargement as a fairly positive process, which would have provided an alternative to the NATO’s expansion<sup>75</sup>. The Kremlin saw American hand in what happened in the “near abroad” after 2000, reading of the “color revolutions” as largely U.S. conspiratorial activities meant to drastically reduce Russia’s influence in the neighbourhood, and expand the United States<sup>76</sup>. With the EaP, however, Moscow became much more worried about the EU. The speed, with which the 27 EU members mobilized to launch the EaP and the strengthening of the EU after the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon, put Russia on thoughts. For Moscow, the EU became now the major rival in the “near abroad”, especially provided that “the EU is the only great power with unsettled borders”<sup>77</sup>.

## CONCLUSIONS

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia has sought to keep its influence in the “near abroad” as a guarantee of its own security and as a need for being “not just a big nation-state” but “a pole in a multipolar world”<sup>78</sup>. The domestic problems and the lack of resources undermined this aim in the ’90s though. It was only after 2000 that Moscow had the necessary means and decided to regain the lost positions. However, the gas wars, the acquisition of the strategic assets of the former Soviet republics, the trade boycotts, the political discourse about the fall of the Soviet Union as the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century put on alert both the countries of the “near abroad” and the EU about Russia’s attempts of rebuilding its empire, not necessarily by drawing new physical borders but by strengthening the dependence of its neighbours.

Translated in asymmetric federalization plans (the Kozak memorandum), energy blackmail or attempts of economic disruptions, the imperial recovery

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<sup>75</sup> Leonid A. Karabeshin, Dina R. Spechler, “EU and NATO Enlargement: Russia's Expectations, Responses and Options for the Future”, *European Security*, vol. 16, no. 3-4, 2007, p. 308.

<sup>76</sup> Dmitri Trenin, “Russia's Spheres...cit.”, p. 12.

<sup>77</sup> Ivan Krastev, “Russia’s post-Orange Empire”, *Open Democracy*, October 20, 2005, [http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-europe\\_constitution/postorange\\_2947.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-europe_constitution/postorange_2947.jsp), last accessed August 10, 2014.

<sup>78</sup> Nicu Popescu, Andrew Wilson, “The ‘Sovereign Neighbourhood’ Weak Statehood Strategies in Eastern Europe”, *The International Spectator*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2009, p. 7.

trend sought to discredit the former Soviet republics, presenting them as failed states, and create the circumstances that allow Russia to easily influence their internal and external policies. Of course, the economic dependency of the "near abroad", the strong links created during a three generations common history, the readiness of using great financial resources for external purposes, give Russia an advantage in front of the EU in the relationship with the "common neighbourhood", however, abusing of these means have nothing but raised suspicion in the former Soviet republics about Russia's viability as strategic partner. Furthermore, instead of approaching its neighbours the "energodiplomacy" or the economic wars made the former Soviet republics look for rapprochement with the EU and the NATO, as guarantors of their sovereignty. Within this context, the EaP emerged not only from the EU's need of building "a ring of friends" around its Eastern borders, but in response to the demands of the countries from the "common neighbourhood" for greater EU's involvement in this area.